



BEYOND HEROES AND HOLIDAYS

*A Practical
Guide to K-12
Anti-Racist,
Multicultural
Education
and Staff
Development*



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Looking Through an Anti-Racist Lens

by Enid Lee

When examining cases of racism and inequity in schools, we often explain them in terms of lack of individual effort, bad luck, human nature or the inevitability of inequality. These explanations are not grounded in a social understanding of events and processes. In contrast, viewing the same cases through an anti-racist lens allows us to see how the use of power by individuals, communities and institutions has brought about the current situation. We can see how power is used to make change or to keep things the way they are, particularly with regard to the issues of rights, respect, resources, and representation based on skin color. An anti-racist lens leads us to look at the historical roots for both explanations and solutions.

I work in many schools throughout the United States and Canada assisting teachers, students, parents, support staff and administrators to confront and dismantle systems and structures which promote racism. These structures contribute to inequitable educational outcomes for all children. Over the years, I have developed the practice of looking at the situations I find in schools through an anti-racist lens. Whether we are aware of it or not, each of us looks through a particular set of lenses. I prefer to use a lens instead of a checklist since a checklist can sometimes be too linear, not sufficiently sensitive to context. A lens on the other hand, with its curved sides, has the capacity to disperse light rays into the many dark areas which always surround cases of racism.

I will outline what I see when I look through an anti-racist lens and invite you to use this lens when you look at situations in your school.

On looking through an anti-racist lens, I am able to see how skin color, shade, texture of hair and shape of eyes influence the opportunities we have in life, the rights we enjoy, and the access we have to resources and the representation and respect we receive. The anti-racist lens helps me to bring a historical and political perspective to solving problems and to understanding the roots of these problems. I can see how the ways in which we have organized our lives and our institutions,

around race and other identities, have brought us to our present positions. These other identities include language, nationality, immigration status, culture and faith, which are often racialized.

The anti-racist lens helps me to get at the ideas that support and justify practices which treat some people, based on their skin color, as superior and more deserving, while treating other people as inferior and less deserving.

The most important feature of the anti-racist lens is that it leads me to see how situations can be transformed and how injustices can be reversed. It draws my attention to the ways in which power can be used and is used at the individual, community and institutional levels for change. It reminds me that educational failure is not inevitable and that we can bring about justice in our classrooms.

Signposts

There are several signposts I see when I look through this lens. They are:

1. Representation and roles in terms of racial group membership.
 - Appearances and accents of those engaged in any activity.
 - Leaders and supports in terms of racial group membership.
 - Absences in terms of racial group membership.
2. History and human agency.
 - The official and unofficial versions of the actions undertaken by individuals, communities and institutions which brought about this state of affairs.
 - The accounts of resistance to injustice.
3. Ideology and interests.
 - Images, statements, accounts and beliefs that are evoked to justify and maintain current situations.
 - Identification of those who benefit and those who lose from current situations.
 - Structures, systems, and sources of power.
 - Arrangements, patterns, processes, policies.

procedures and traditions in organizations and schools in particular. These are the concrete ways in which things happen.

People and committees responsible for making decisions. When you look at these places and these people racism ceases to become a mystery. We see how it happens.

4. Hope and human agency.

Accounts of the ways in which human beings have used and are using the power they have as individuals, as members of groups and as employees in institutions to bring about racial justice, to maintain that justice once it is achieved, and to encourage others to join them to work in this area.

In order to deal with the particular situations in schools and other organizations in light of the signposts listed above, I have developed a cluster of questions and actions which help me work with strategic competence in the contexts in which we encounter racism. These questions and activities have been used by teachers, parents and students as they look through an anti-racist lens to critically analyze and act upon situations in their schools.

It is important to note that we can also apply other lenses when looking at issues of equity in schools. For example, sometimes the lenses of class or gender must be brought in focus because of the context. I have found, in my work however, that even when I work with the lenses of gender and class, I often gain a greater understanding of the situations before me when I insert the race lens over the lens of gender or class. For instance, when I am trying to understand why such negativity is being expressed against working class parents and their assumed lack of interest in their children's education, and I discover that those parents are African American, African Canadian, Native American, Native Canadian or Latino. I can raise the delicate question of race and help the discussion move forward to a more positive place.

Using the Lens: Questions for Reflection and Action

Critical Analysis

1. **What is the specific issue being addressed?** Who is involved in terms of race, language, class, gender and other aspects of identity?
2. **How did things get to be the way they are?** What were some of the needs and strengths identi-

fied? Who identified them as needs and strengths? What actions were undertaken or not undertaken by individuals, community, and institutions in the recent past and in the distant past which brought about this situation? What were the terms under which actions were undertaken? Who established those terms? Who knew about them and who did not?

3. What are some of the beliefs (prevailing ideologies) that have led to this situation? What are the beliefs that are held by those in power and by those without the power about the ability and worth of people of particular racial backgrounds?

What are the explanations that are presented to justify actions and the positions of privilege or disadvantage that members of different racial groups enjoy or endure?

4. What are some things that keep the situation the way it is?

Has there been a conscious examination of the experiences of people of color with respect to the issue? Has there been an examination of the impact of school policies and practices, connected with communication for example, on parents and students and faculty of various racial backgrounds?

How has the institutional silence on these matters helped to maintain the status quo? How has the lack of material, financial, and/or human resources contributed to the situation? How has an inadequate time commitment resulted in the situation remaining unchanged?

5. Which groups in society benefit or lose from the present situation?

Which individuals' and communities' resources (cultural, spiritual, intellectual and financial) increase or decrease because of this situation?

Where and how are the voices and views of members of various racial groups represented or excluded in this present situation? How are the rights to self-determination of racial communities ensured?

How are we challenging the pattern and practice of one community or member of a racial group speaking for and determining the activities and direction for another community or member of another racial group?

Who in terms of racial group membership is feeling respected and validated and treated with human dignity? Who in terms of racial group membership is experiencing a sense of inherent superiority and of deserving all the privileges they enjoy?

Strategic Action

6. What would I have to change in order for the situation to be different?

Based on the responses to the questions above, I develop a strategic plan to address the roots of the problem. I gather information about the experiences of those who have been marginalized and those who have been validated by the processes. I disseminate that information through all technologies at my disposal. I, along with others, expose the sources of power and decision-making.

With all concerned constituencies, especially those who have been formally excluded, we redefine needs, strengths and resources. Together we redefine and redistribute roles, responsibilities and resources for greater equity to the extent that we are able, well aware that facing resistance and reversals are part of the process of making change towards racial equality.

We publicize and celebrate whatever gains we make along the way as a means of encouraging ourselves and others.

7. Where can I find allies?

I cast about with my anti-racist lens and I see that allies are everywhere. I make a list of all the people who have a vested interest in addressing the situation. I look to my colleagues who say they want our organization to work well, who say they want all students to succeed. I turn to those who work for social justice. I appeal to those whose reputation for excellence makes them likely partners in the struggle for equality. "If you are good at what you do, let everyone experience it."

I look to parents of color and all of those who want their children to have access to the best quality education. I also look to parents who are White who see the situation as a matter of justice and who also feel that their children's lives are enriched by racial, cultural and linguistic diversity. I see allies among those parents, students and teachers who have been victimized because of some form of difference — gender, sexual orientation, class, etc.

I turn to the grassroots, race-specific and academic organizations in the community.

I see as some of my greatest allies those who have gone before and have struggled and resisted racism. As a woman of African descent working between Canada and the United States, I turn often to my ally Harriet Tubman who did much anti-racist work between these two countries. She led Africans out of one kind bondage from the United States

into what others might describe as another kind of bondage in Canada. Nevertheless as my ally, I feel her legacy of perseverance.

8. What kind of work can we do in the many spheres of influence in which we operate?

Interpersonal basis with one person: colleague to colleague, student to student, parent to parent.

Class level with all students through formal curriculum.

Department or faculty-level at a faculty or staff meeting.

Parent gatherings and student gatherings.

Meeting with administration and other authorities.

School community: unions, associations and clubs.

People in other schools through networks including chat lines and e-mail connections.

Organizations, institutions and individuals outside the schools.

Lawmakers: school trustees, city councilors.

Media: newsletters, newspapers, television, tapes, CD-ROMs, websites in various languages.

9. How can we institutionalize this change? How can we prevent this situation from reoccurring?

Monitor, monitor, monitor!

Keep good records.

Check all systems to ensure that outcomes are realized.

Ensure that the issue is inserted at the policy and procedural levels.

Remind everyone that intent is not what counts: it is outcome that matters.

Remind everyone that until every person regardless of racial background is experiencing equality in the areas of respect, rights to self-determination and full humanity, representation and resources, we still have a job to do.

Keep hopeful by looking at and learning from others who have worked on and are working on these issues all around the world.

Always celebrate what has been accomplished to date.